ON THE USE OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN TWEETS RELATED TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR: PODOLYAK VS POLYANSKIY

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Abstract

The paper explores the use of rhetorical questions in Twitter posts of Mykhailo Podolyak (a Ukrainian presidential adviser) and Dmitry Polyanskiy (a Russian official), in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The goals of the paper are, among others, to find out what kinds of rhetorical questions are used, what their main communicative functions are, and what differences or similarities can be observed in the use of these questions on Twitter by the two officials. The obtained results indicate that notable, statistically significant differences in the use of rhetorical questions by the two individuals do exist, regarding the form of such questions, who they are addressed at, as well as in terms of the primary functions that they perform in the analysed tweets.

1   Introduction

Rhetorical questions (henceforth, RQs) are "effective persuasion devices" (Hautli-Janisz et al. 2022: 57), extensively used in various fields and contexts (political speeches, judicial procedures, marketing and advertising, social media, etc.). As such, they have attracted a lot of attention, and have been frequently studied from different angles. The convenience and communicative effectiveness of such questions is often explained by a number of distinguishing qualities or practical uses that can be associated with them: their persuasive power (Frank 1990, Blankenship & Craig 2006), or the power to resist persuasion (Blankenship & Craig 2006), challenge the interlocutor's arguments (Cerović 2016), express an opinion (Ranganath et al. 2017), engage or entice the audience (Neitch & Niebuhr 2022), make sarcastic comments (Oraby et al. 2017), or to strengthen or mitigate the content which they express (Frank 1990, Ilie 1994). A particularly important quality of RQs is that they can perform multiple discourse functions simultaneously.

Twitter represents a significant and powerful communication medium, as it offers a quick and easy way to reach a large number of people instantaneously (Kumar et al. 2014, Ranganath et al. 2017). As such, it is particularly convenient in times of crises or social unrest – for instance, its role during the Arab Spring

or the Occupy Wall Street movement has been significant (Kumar et al. 2014). Additionally, it is an effective and highly popular platform for politicians (McGregor et al. 2017), or anyone else trying to rally support or influence masses. While RQs are widely used on Twitter (as well as other social media), and, according to Sharoda et al. (2011), they represent the most frequent type of questions posed in tweets, studies on the use of RQs in social media are still rather scant. A few studies that dealt with this topic focused on what kinds of questions are asked on Twitter (Sharoda et al. 2011), how to identify RQs in social media, i.e. how to differentiate them from other types of questions (Ranganath et al. 2017), or on the exploration of sarcastic vs non-sarcastic uses of RQs on Twitter and in debate forums (Oraby et al. 2017).

In this paper, I will examine and compare the use of RQs in the tweets posted over a five-month period by a Ukrainian (Mykhailo Podolyak) and a Russian government official (Dmitry Polyanskiy). The tweets are almost exclusively related to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which has grabbed the attention of the world, and turned into a huge threat to peace and stability in Europe and elsewhere. Namely, as one could expect, alongside the fighting at the frontlines, an information war is being waged on social media sites, and one particularly convenient and powerful weapon in that war is the RQ.

The aim of this paper is to explore the following: i) different functions of RQs in the examined tweets, i.e. what the addressors are trying to achieve with them; ii) who the RQs are directed at; iii) the share of sarcastic RQs, compared to non-sarcastic ones, in the selected tweets; iv) potential differences and similarities in the use of RQs by Podolyak and Polyanskiy.

2   Background

2.1 Previous studies on RQs

There are different accounts regarding the nature of RQs – according to Han (2002), they are indirect statements in the form of questions (with the polarity of such implied statements being opposite to that of the questions); van Rooy (2003) treats them as questions with a limited set of possible answers; for Rohde (2006), they are redundant interrogatives, as the answers to them are already clear to everybody; Caponigro and Sprouse (2007) view them as questions which differ from the standard ones only at the pragmatic level, as they are used to emphasize something which is obvious. However, by all accounts, RQs are not posed with the intention to obtain information (or elicit an informative answer), and they have strong persuasive power.

As stated earlier, various studies explored specific uses of RQs in different contexts and languages. Ilie explored the use of RQs in political speeches (Ilie 1994), courtroom proceedings (Ilie 1995), as well as in talk shows (Ilie 1999). She found that the use of RQs is associated with opinion manipulation in political speeches, challenging or manipulating power in courtroom proceedings, or presenting arguments and shaping public opinion, when used in talk shows (for a detailed overview, see Ilie 1999: 979-980).

Schaffer (2005) investigated the use of RQs as retorts, i.e. how they can function as legitimate and convincing answers to information-eliciting questions (A: *How reliable is he?* B: _How shallow is the ocean?_). Among other things, she found that such RQs can often be associated with the addressor's intention to sound funny or humorous when answering standard questions.

Blankenship and Craig (2006: 111) examined the use of RQs in messages, and found that such RQs have resistance effects, as they "increased participants' attitudinal resistance to an attacking message".

Badarneh (2009) analyzed RQs taken from Arabic newspaper editorials, and concluded that the content of such RQs, which deal with sensitive and controversial political topics, is often aggressive and polemical. In another study, Badarneh (2016: 207) explored RQs used as proverbs in Jordanian Arabic, and found that their use is linked, among other things, with humor, irony, or "performing face-enhancing and face-aggravating acts".

Kleinke (2012) explored the use of RQs and responses to such questions by speakers of English and German in internet discussion forums, and established that their rhetorical force is often open to negotiation, which occurs through the process of responding to them.

Cerović (2016) conducted a study on the use of RQs by Montenegrin suspects during police interrogations, where such questions are intended to challenge the interrogators' accusations and arguments, finding that most of them elicited responses in the form of counter-challenges.

Neitch and Niebuhr (2022) explored how speakers of German perceive the prosody of RQs when used in sales presentations, and concluded that the survey participants favored lexically marked RQs whose prosody is the same as the one typically used for information-seeking questions.

2.2 Previous studies on the use of RQs on Twitter

There has been a limited number of studies which focused on the use of RQs on Twitter (or other social media sites). Sharoda et al. (2011) explored what types of questions are mostly posed on Twitter on a sample of over a million tweets and found that the most common type are RQs (accounting for 43%

of questions identified in their corpus), followed by what they termed factual *knowledge questions* and *polls*. The finding that RQs are the most frequent kind of questions posted on Twitter is hardly surprising if we consider the fact that RQs are not asked with the intention to elicit answers, and that over 80 per cent of the questions identified in those tweets did not get any answers.

In their study, Ranganath et al. (2017) focused on how to effectively identify RQs posed on Twitter, based on two motivations of users when posting them – to indirectly convey a message, or to mitigate/strengthen a previously conveyed message. They propose a quantitative framework designed to facilitate the identification of RQs on Twitter and other social media sites.

After previously exploring the use of sarcasm in online debate forums (Oraby et al. 2016), including sarcastic RQs, Oraby et al. (2017: 317) examined the use of sarcastic and non-sarcastic RQs on Twitter and in debate forums, and found "distinct linguistic differences between the methods of expression used in RQs across forums and Twitter". They noted that non-sarcastic RQs from debate forums tend to be used to express an argument in a more emphatical and concise way, whereas those used on Twitter are often aimed at "advertising or grabbing attention" (ibid.: 312).

2.3 The role of Twitter and other social media in information warfare

Information war is defined as "use and management of information and communication technology in pursuit of competitive advantage over an opponent" (Hussain et al. 2021: 3), and it is related to manipulative language uses aimed at accomplishing political and military gains (Thornton 2015). Social media represent a powerful and convenient venue for achieving different goals through persuasion, such as framing public opinion, promoting one's causes, or attempting to create a positive self-image at an international level (Hussain et al. 2021).

Twitter is a particularly convenient social media when it comes to reaching, attracting, and influencing masses, since it is, as noted by Ott (2016), based on simplicity, impulsivity and incivility. A number of studies dealt with the use of Twitter in information wars, focusing either on the use of bots or fake accounts (for instance, Bessi & Ferrara 2016 explored the manipulative use of fake Twitter accounts prior to the 2016 US elections, aimed at confusing potential voters, and affecting the results; similarly, Bastos & Mercea 2017 examined how fake Twitter accounts were used to promote Brexit), or on the use of Twitter by politicians - especially by Donald Trump (Ott 2016, Pain & Chen 2019; and others). The use of Twitter (and other social media) in promotion and rallying support for social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, has also been explored (Wilkins et al. 2019).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research questions

Based on the set goals, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most common functions of the RQs used in the tweets posted by Podolyak and Polyanskiy, and who are the RQs primarily addressed to?
2. In what form do they appear?
3. What is the share of sarcastic RQs in their tweets?
4. What differences, if any, can be found in the use of RQs by the two officials?

3.2 Corpus

The corpus for this research is made up of tweets posted over a five-month period (May – September 2022) by Mykhailo Podolyak, a top adviser to the President of Ukraine (a total of 411 tweets), and Dmitry Polyanskiy, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN (400 tweets). The tweets were taken from their official Twitter accounts in September and early October 2022. These individuals were selected because they are influential Ukrainian and Russian officials who publish tweets in English on a daily basis. Initially, I had intended to analyze the tweets of Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, who is also very active on Twitter and regularly publishes tweets in English, but, surprisingly, his tweets contained very few RQs. As for Polyanskiy, he is one of very few Russian officials who regularly post tweets in English. As expected, almost all of the tweets are directly or indirectly related to the ongoing war in Ukraine, reflecting diametrically opposed viewpoints. Retweets, or tweets published in a language other than English, were not included in this study.

The size of the corpus (811 tweets) is, in my estimation, big enough to offer a solid insight into the use of RQs in this kind of discourse on Twitter, and, yet, small enough to be managable, as examples of RQs were identified and handled manually. There was no particular reason for the selection of tweets from the stated time period. The table below shows an overview of the tweets published in English by the two officials over the specified time.

	May	June	July	August	September	**Total**
Podolyak	87	75	74	80	95	411
Polyanskiy	93	94	68	85	60	400

Table 1: An overview of tweets published by Podolyak and Polyanskiy in May-September 2022

3.3 Method and study design

The analysis of data in this study was done using elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The former was used to describe and analyze different types of RQs from the corpus, as well as their functions, and the latter to explore the frequency of occurrence for different categories. The examples of RQs from the corpus were identified manually, and grouped into different categories based on a number of variables: sarcastic vs non-sarcastic; who the RQs are addressed to; and what the main functions of RQs are. In those instances where I had doubts regarding the classification of certain examples according to the mentioned criteria, I consulted three respondents (a professor of linguistics and two students from the Master's program in linguistics, all of them fluent English speakers). Strings of two or more RQs in the same tweet were treated as one example. When considering potential statistically significant differences in the use of RQs between the two Twitter users, the chi-square test of independence was done, using a calculation tool at https://biomath.med.uth.gr/statistics/chi_square.html.

4   Results and discussion

This section is divided into three subsections. The first two focus on the analysis of the individual use of RQs in Podolyak's and Polyanskiy's tweets, respectively, and the third deals with the differences and similarities between them.

4.1 RQs in tweets posted by Mykhailo Podolyak

Out of 411 tweets published in English by the Ukrainian official over the specified time period, 92 (22.38%) contain RQs, formulated either as single questions (68 tweets; 73.91%), or strings of two or more RQs (24 tweets; 26.09%). Interestingly, although one of the key features of Twitter is simple-message production (Ott 2016), Podolyak's RQs are, in all of the tweets, combined with other written content, and never used alone. The rhetorical interpretation and identification of these questions in tweets is, in addition to accompanying content in tweets, sometimes facilitated by images or videos. However, the implications and intended meanings conveyed by his RQs are mostly clear from the content of his tweets (i.e. not dependent on accompanying videos, images, retweets, etc.). Almost all of his RQs end in a question mark (in 90 tweets; 97.82%), the only two exceptions being RQs which are formulated as indirect questions – although it is generally quite unlikely for RQs to take this form. Regarding the form, different types of questions are represented, as shown in Table 2, with *wh*-RQs being the most common, and alternative RQs the rarest type.

Form	Example	No. of tweets in which this form appears
Wh-questions	*Who has to believe in this, except for the Z-camp?*	30
Yes-no questions	*Do they need a concentration camp ticket?*	27
Declarative questions	*Putin is talking about a desire for peace again?*	17
Fragmentary questions	*Z-ultimatums again?*	14
Question tags	*Everything is going according to the plan, Mr Rudenko, isn't it?*	8
Echo questions	*Show what?(…)*	5
Alternative questions	*Is it still according to the plan, or should we help speed it up?*	4
Indirect questions	*The question is where would Dmitry Medvedev be in two years.*	2

Table 2: Different forms of RQs posted by M. Podolyak

There seems to be a correlation between who Podolyak's RQs are addressed to, and what he is trying to achieve with them. In regard to the former, all of the RQs from his tweets can be classified into one of the following categories:

- RQs addressed to the enemy,
- RQs addressed to the Western powers or leaders,
- RQs addressed to the general public,
- RQs addressed to individual persons or organizations (other than the enemy or the West),
- RQs quoted from other sources.

4.1.1 RQs addressed to the enemy

The single most common category in this regard is RQs directed at the enemies who invaded Ukraine or support the invasion (Russian Federation, Russian leadership or soldiers, or individual Russian officials, collaborators, etc.) – such RQs appear in as many as 42 tweets (45.65% of the tweets which include RQs).

Enemy-directed RQs in Podolyak's tweets are predominantly formulated as sarcastic RQs (in 38 tweets, or 90.47% of all RQs/strings of RQs directed at the enemy), and their main function is to ridicule and express mockery of the Russian side, their actions, statements, or claims. By expressing derision towards the enemy, the addressor also gives vent to his anger towards them, serves as a voice for Ukrainians faced with the invasion, and puts down the invaders in front of the entire Twitter community. Such extensive use of sarcastic RQs in reference to the enemy could be explained by the previous findings that sarcasm intensifies

the emotional effects of the sent messages, as well as negative attitudes towards the target (Filik et al. 2016, Toplak & Katz 2000). Interestingly, in opposition to the findings of Oraby et.al. (2016: 36) that sarcastic RQs used in online debate forums are often accompanied by emoticons or repeated punctuations to facilitate their sarcastic interpretation, it is never the case with sarcastic RQs in Podolyak's tweets. However, putting some words or expressions in quotation marks is occasionally used to signal sarcasm in RQs. A recurring RQ, which, in different variants, appears in twelve tweets, is related to the claim repeatedly made by the Russian leadership at the start of the war that "everything is going according to plan":

(1) (…) ***Everything is going according to the plan, right?*** *Well, the plan was great. As reliable as Swiss watch.* (7 May, 2022)

(2) (…) *September is coming.* **Is "(Russian) Spring" still going as planned?** (26 August, 2022)

Repeated patterns in which such RQs appear (each found in 3 tweets) are echo RQs followed by another RQ suggesting an answer (Example 3), or questions in the form "(*do you*) *want*…" addressed to the enemy soldiers or officials (Example 4), which enhances the contempt for the target (other sarcastic RQs do not follow any specific pattern):

(3) *The portrait of modern Russia – Dmitry Medvedev (…). "Just a little more and I will show you all!"* **Show what? Murder one more child?** (17 July, 2022)

(4) *Leaders of pro-Russian criminal enclaves claim that they want to make Mariupol a resort on the Sea of Azov. (…)* **Want to sunbathe on the beach?** *Ukrainian special services will issue a personal "hot tour" to everyone.* (18 May, 2022)

It is interesting to note that, in opposition to the findings of Oraby et al. (2016: 38) that many sarcastic RQs in their corpus focused on the attacks on the mental abilities of the target, it is not the case here. Instead, the focus is usually on the unscrupulousness, evil side, or incompetence of the Russian invaders.

A few non-sarcastic RQs levelled at the enemy serve either to present convincing arguments to the enemy (and everyone else) that Ukrainians are not going to give up (Example 5 – such RQs are used in 3 tweets and they are simultaneously meant to encourage Ukrainians), or to the enemy collaborators that they are being used by the Russian invaders (Example 6):

(5)   *Massive shelling of (Ukraine) on Independence Day — another manifestation of ru-barbarians' helplessness and terrorist nature after six months of shame. **Is it still not clear that trying to intimidate Ukrainians is a losing option?** Better think about the final "gesture of goodwill"...*   (24 August, 2022)

(6)   *By the way, **why in the struggle for the "Russian world" in (Ukraine) Buryats, Tuvans, Dagestanis & Chechens act as "expendable" people whose corpses lie in our fields, but not Muscovites and Petersburgers?** The colonies of the Russian Nazi Empire should have asked some logical questions.*   (27 May, 2022)

4.1.2 RQs addressed to the Western powers or leaders

Such RQs were found in 24 tweets (26% of the tweets which contain RQs). Although these RQs are sometimes addressed to the "international community", "world", and "UN", it is obvious that Podolyak is actually sending messages to Western powers or leaders, because they are the ones who are capable of providing help. Most of these RQs/strings of RQs (in 19 tweets; 79.16%) primarily function as call-to-action linguistic devices aimed at instigating the addressees to do something. While this function of RQs has been paid little attention in previous studies (or it was claimed that RQs can never be used as action-eliciting questions – Ilie 1994), RQs can apparently perform this role as well (this function of RQs was acknowledged in the study on RQs by Oraby et al. 2017). In such instances, the persuasive power of RQs is not only used to convince the addressee to accept the addressor's arguments but to do something about it. RQs are particularly convenient in such situations because they make the requests more powerful and convincing, and lace them with criticism for hesitating to do the requested thing. Namely, in line with previous studies (Frank 1990, Ilie 1994), we can attest to the multifunctionality of the RQs used in the examples below (presenting arguments in a memorable and convincing way; implicitly criticizing the Westers countries for not doing something earlier; mounting public pressure on them by posing RQs on Twitter; etc.), but the addressor's main motivation is to call the West to act. Sometimes (Example 7), the RQ is further strengthened by an explicit request:

(7)   *Invasion of another country, mass murders, annexation attempt, nuclear weapons threats… **How many more red lines are needed for UN to end the membership of the RF, whose presence was never voted for?** The right petition, the right questions. #unRussiaUN* (23 September, 2022)

(8)   *The type of war chosen by Russia is clear. Total destruction of cities (Mariupol, Bakhmut/Kharkiv). (…) **What the world is waiting for?***   (19 September, 2022)

(9)   *Orban says that he will fight for the lifting of sanctions against (Russia). Let's call a spade a spade. Hungary – Trojan horse seeking the collapse of (Ukraine) at the expense of European taxpayers. (...)* **Should EU finance these diversions?** *(18 September, 2022)*

While the examples above show, in line with Oraby et al. (2017: 316), that non-sarcastic RQs are frequently utilized as call-to-action language tools, sarcastic RQs are also significantly represented among the RQs directed at the Western powers (they are found in 11 tweets; 45.83% of RQs addressed to the Western powers), and in eight tweets they also function as indirect requests, although laced with more evident sarcastic criticism towards the West for not providing help earlier. A recurring pattern of such RQs (found in 5 tweets) is "Maybe it is time to do something":

(10)   *Western countries have many modern and effective missile/air defense systems. But missiles do not fly over Paris, Rome or Berlin. They fly over (Ukrainian) cities.* **Maybe it is time to protect civilians and critical infrastructure? Or will we wait for a large-scale man-made disaster?** *(17 September, 2022)*

(11)   **If the West really wants (Ukraine)'s victory, maybe it is time to give us long-range MLRS?** *It is hard to fight when you are attacked from a 70 km distance and have nothing to fight back with. (...)* *(28 May, 2022)*

A few RQs from this category are not used as calls to action, but to ridicule claims or actions of some Western politicians (as shown in Example 12, sarcastic echo RQs seem to be particularly convenient for this), or to present a convincing argument in the form of a non-sarcastic RQ (Example 13):

(12)   *Some Western politicians want to end the war and "save face" of (Russia) by giving it part of a (Ukrainian) territory, -*@politico*.* **Save face after Bucha and Mariupol?** *Strange logic, but if these politicians want to give away part of their territories, it is up to their electorate.* *(16 May, 2022)*

(13)   *(...) (Ukraine) defends not only itself, but also European borders.* **Isn't it obvious?** *(24 September, 2022)*

4.1.3 RQs addressed to the general public

A significant number of Podolyak's RQs (16; 17.39%) are apparently directed to the general public, most of them (13) with the intention to convincingly present his arguments as valid and logical. The target audience for these persuasive messages is, among others, his own people, who need to be assured

that the Ukrainian leadership is making the right decisions, or that they are not responsible for something:

(14)   *Forget about "denazification". Real (Russian) goals in this war are: - capture of territories; - destruction of industrial potential and infrastructure; - food and metals theft; - mass murders; - migration crisis.* **So, what to negotiate about with the ones who came to kill you?**   (11 June, 2022)

(15)   **If (Ukraine) "wasn't prepared" for the war, why did the first (Russian) strikes hit mock-ups, ammunition was scattered, trainings were held on January and February?** *(Ukraine)'s been preparing since the last year: we've known about the invasion not only from Western, but also by our intelligence.*   (11 June 2022)

The RQs addressed to the general public are, with one exception, non-sarcastic, most likely because the main intention here is not to mock or ridicule, but to present sound arguments in a memorable and persuasive way.

4.1.4 RQs addressed to individuals or quoted from other sources

RQs/strings of RQs addressed to individuals or individual organizations (unrelated either to those from the Russian side or Western powers) appear in six tweets, and they are mostly used to criticize those people for certain tweets or activities, or, in two tweets, to ridicule their claims or actions:

(16)   (…) *"I was not naive" – said the chancellor (Merkel).* **Then why did you shove (the EU) on the (Russian) oil/gas needle? And why does (Germany) have to fix (these) mistakes now?**   (8 June, 2022)

(17)   *No one voluntarily queues for the death from (Russian) missiles,* @GharibashviliGe *(Ukraine) pays a terrible price (…) Values are more important than profit.* **What is important to you? Application queue number?**   (14 June, 2022)

Finally, Podolyak quotes RQs from other sources in four tweets – either those posed by Russian officials (he quotes them in order to reject the arguments presented in them), or by someone who supports Ukraine (in order to praise them for that).

(18)   *"Why would (Russia) fire at itself at ZNPP?" – ru-propagandists pretend to be clowns. Explaining: Russia fires (…)*   (13 August, 2022)

4.1.5 RQs used in Podolyak's tweets – an overview

An overview of the use of RQs in Mykhailo Podolyak's tweets (presented in Table 3) shows that it is characterized by the following: the wide use of RQs, with a large share of sarcastic ones; RQs are mainly directed at the enemy, Western powers, or general public; the main functions of his RQs are to ridicule/mock the enemy, call the West to help Ukraine or convince all the Twitter community that his arguments are sound and self-evident.

Who the RQs are addressed to	Number of tweets in which it appears	Main function	Share of sarcastic RQs in tweets
Someone from the Russian side	42 (45.65%)	Ridiculing/mockery 38 (90.47%)	38 (90.47%)
		Presenting convincing arguments 3 (7.14%)	
		Other 1 (2.38%)	
Western powers/ leaders	24 (26%)	Call to action 19 (79.16%)	11 (45.83%)
		Ridiculing/mockery 3 (12.5%)	
		Presenting convincing arguments 2 (8.33%)	
General public/ Twitter community	16 (17.39%)	Presenting convincing arguments 13 (81.25%)	1 (6.25%)
		Ridiculing/mockery 1 (6.25%)	
		Other 2 (12.5%)	
Individuals (other than the Russians or the West)	6 (6.52%)	Criticizing 4 (66.66%)	2 (33.33%)
		Ridiculing/mockery 2 (33.33%)	
Other (quoted RQs)	4 (4.34%)	-	-
Total	92		52 (56.52%)

Table 3: An overview of the use of RQs in Podolyak's tweets

4.2 RQs in tweets posted by Dmitry Polyanskiy

Out of 400 tweets published in English by the Russian official over the specified time, 39 (9.75%) contain RQs, formulated either as single questions (in 28 tweets; 71.79%) or strings of two (or, in one case, three) RQs (in 11 tweets; 28.2%). Sarcastic RQs are commonly used by Polyanskiy (in 23 tweets; 58.97% of the tweets include RQs). The use of emoticons in combination with such RQs was rare (only in two cases), which is not in line with the findings of Oraby et al. (2016) that sarcastic RQs in online forums are often followed by emoticons.

The RQs in his tweets were frequently combined with other written content (in 28 tweets), but a significant number of them (11; 28.2% of tweets which included such questions) contained RQs accompanied only by images, videos, or retweets from other sources. Generally, the context for the full understanding of his RQs is often provided by such accompanying materials. Most of his RQs end in a question mark (in 35 tweets; 89.4%). Regarding the form of his RQs, they are mostly formulated as *wh-* or *yes-no* questions, and never, or almost never, as declarative or question tags. However, instances of indirect RQs have also been found in his tweets.

Form	Example	Number of tweets in which this form appears
Wh-questions	*Who cares about geography when such important things are being announced!*	20
Yes-no questions	*Can this perversion be cured?*	13
Echo questions	*Looting by Ukrainian army in Donbas?What looting?*	7
Alternative questions	*Are European leaders so naive, or they have no choice but to be naive?*	4
Fragmentary questions	*Any questions why you would welcome Russian army to liberate you?*	2
Declarative questions	*Maybe it's worth the next Oscar?*	1
Indirect questions	*I can't imagine who in sound mind could listen to such personalities who clearly hate their (...)*	2

Table 4: Different forms of RQs posted by D. Polyaskiy

There are two recurring patterns which the Russian official uses to formulate his RQs: echo RQs in the form *X*? *What x*? (found in 7 tweets; always formulated as sarcastic questions, and always accompanied by a video, image, or a retweet to clarify the intended meaning), and *Where is something/someone?* (found in 4 tweets; formulated as sarcastic or non-sarcastic questions):

(19) ***Looting by Ukrainian army in Donbass? What looting?*** (26 June, 2022)

(20) ***Where is Western Media reaction?*** (…) (13 June, 2022)

Based on who they are addressed to, Polyanskiy's RQs can be classified into four categories:
- RQs addressed to the enemy,
- RQs addressed to the Western powers or leaders,

- RQs addressed to the general public,
- RQs addressed to individuals (other than the enemy or the West).

4.2.1 RQs addressed to the enemy

It is not rare that Polyanskiy refers to (or explicitly mentions) someone from the Ukrainian side when using RQs (such instances appear in 14 tweets; 35.89% of his RQs). However, it is only in one tweet that he directly addressed them (more specifically, their Minister of Foreign Affairs):

(21)   *Wait a minute…***weren't you accusing Russia up till now that we are "blocking Ukrainian ports", how does your readiness to "create necessary conditions" to resume exports fit in this narrative?*   (4 June, 2022 – it refers to a tweet posted by the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba)

There could be a number of reasons why Polyanskiy mostly avoids directly addressing Ukrainians. While it could be his individual language style (to address the general public instead of individual persons or groups), it can also be due to his feeling of superiority, or his focus on the general public, in an attempt to justify the actions of the Russian side and present them as necessary.

4.2.2 RQs addressed to the Western powers or leaders

Although a reference to someone from the West is quite common in Polyanskiy's RQs (it appears in as many as 22 tweets; 56.41% of tweets with RQs), it is again very rare that he directly addresses them (probably for the same reasons as with the Ukrainians), as only two such examples have been found in the corpus:

(22)   *Look into these eyes! This man promotes a Nuclear disaster for most of Europe. **Do you agree with this plan?** If you do, continue to support (Ukraine)* (14 August, 2022)

(23)   H*ow stubborn are our US ex-partners in denying the obvious things confirmed by many experts! Even if there are exemptions, there is such thing as overcompliance which almost nullifies these exemptions. **Whom do you want to convince?** Your empty claims alone will not drop the prices*   (21 July, 2022)

While the RQ in Example 22 functions as a warning to the West, the one in Example 23 serves to express criticism of the USA leadership.

4.2.3 RQs addressed to the general public

Most of Polyanskiy's tweets which contain RQs (34; 87.17%) are addressed to the general public. The main functions (although not the only ones) that the RQs from these tweets perform are the following: a) ridiculing/expressing mockery; b) presenting arguments in a convincing way; c) criticizing.

4.2.3.1 RQs used to ridicule/express mockery

This is the most common function of Polyanskiy's RQs, found in 16 tweets (41% of all his tweets contain RQs). While these questions, which are all formulated as sarcastic ones, are addressed to all Twitter users, the main target of ridicule is the Western powers or individual Western officials, leaders, or organizations (in 12 tweets; 75% of RQs which are used to mock someone).

(24) ***Who cares about geography when such important things are being announced! Let's be grateful that it's not West or East Korea!*** (30 September, 2022 – he refers to a tweet in which Kamala Harris mistakenly mentions the cooperation between the USA and North Korea)

(25) ***Was*** #BorisJohnson ***having in mind such women when he implied that women are peaceful by nature?*** (30 June, 2022 – he refers to a tweet which reads "Liz Truss wants blood and surrender of Russia")

(26) ***Am I the only one who can't help noticing that this group of supposedly responsible and influential people resembles schoolchildren jealous of a guy from parallel grade?*** #G7 (26 June, 2022 – accompanied by a video from a meeting of G7 leaders)

In two instances, the ridicule and mockery of the West are realized in the form of sarcastic self-criticism (Example 27 – blaming the Russian side for allegedly doing something good). Finally, in the remaining four tweets, the target of ridicule is someone from the Ukrainian side, such as the Ukrainian President, as shown in Example 28.

(27) *Another reckless crime of Russian occupants...****where is intl community?!*** *there should be accountability for such actions!* #Mariupol (13 August, 2022 – he refers to a retweeted story about the alleged restoration of the Philharmonic Hall in Mariupol by the Russian side)

(28) ***Was it sincere or a good acting? Or is he acting now?*** *It's difficult with actors-presidents* (20 September, 2022)

By ridiculing and expressing contempt for the targets, the Russian official is trying to belittle and discredit them in the eyes of his Twitter followers, presenting them as worthless, dishonest or ill-intentioned, while simultaneously giving vent to his own frustration with them. Obviously, sarcastic RQs are a particularly convenient tool for this.

4.2.3.2 RQs used to present arguments in a convincing way

A significant portion of Polyanskiy's RQs/strings of RQs (9; 23.07%) are primarily aimed at presenting arguments which are supposed to justify actions and positions of the Russian side. Certainly, this is, to a great extent, geared towards his own people who need to be persuaded that the Russian leadership made the right decision, or had no choice when it started the invasion. There are two ways in which he tries to accomplish his objective in this regard: by using sarcastic or non-sarcastic RQs. The former (used in 6 tweets) repeatedly put focus on the initial (and, subsequently, many times repeated) excuse for the invasion – that the Russians are trying to "denazify Ukraine", or on alleged crimes committed by the Ukrainian army. The pattern for such RQs (in all 6 sarcastic tweets) is the echo question in the form *X? What X?* accompanied by retweets, images or videos. While such RQs/strings of RQs certainly contain ridicule and mockery, the main goal is to present convincing arguments to the public (especially his own people) that the claim of the Russian leadership was valid, and, thereby, to justify the invasion:

(29)   ***Nazis in #Ukraine? What Nazis?***   (10 September, 2022 – accompanied by pictures that seemingly show captured Ukrainian soldiers with Nazi tattoos)
(30)   ***Looting by Ukrainian army in Donbass? What looting?***   (26 June, 2022 – again combined with pictures)

Regarding the non-sarcastic RQs from this category (appearing in 3 tweets), they are utilized for the same purpose – to justify the invasion:

(31)   *Nazi collaborators. And Western democracies ignore this as well as 8 yr long war that the regime wages against Donbass where your friends die. And you are called Russian agent when you say a word in Russian.* ***Any questions why you would welcome Russian army to liberate you?*** *(*10 September, 2022)

4.2.3.3 RQs used to criticize someone

Equally common as the previous one (appearing in 9 tweets), this category includes non-sarcastic RQs/strings of RQs whose main function is to criticize someone, mostly Western media, countries or leaders (in 7 tweets). The most

common excuse for criticism is what Polyansky sees as double standards of the West:

(32)   *This is a real shelling of a functioning maternity hospital. Not the one used as a firing position.* **But where is Western Media?** *Maximum they report this as "claims that they can't verify". (...)*   (14 June, 2022 – accompanied by a video of what seems to be a bombarded hospital in Russia-controlled territory)

(33)   *Is that what's Europe is praising and commending in* #Ukraine*? If not, where is the criticism? Will we see this type of punishment in European cities too?*   (9 July, 2022)

As always, in addition to their main purpose, RQs from this category simultaneously perform additional roles as well – for instance, presenting arguments to the public that the West has double standards, blaming the Ukrainians for war crimes, or giving vent to his frustration with Western leaders or media.

4.2.4 RQs addressed to individuals (other than the Ukrainians or Western leaders)

Just like with RQs directly addressed to Ukrainians or Western leaders, Polyanskiy's RQs which are directly addressed to other individuals are very rare, with only two tweets of this kind being identified in the corpus. One was used in reference to a tweet posted by the Secretary-General of the UN, and another one in response to a tweet by an individual Twitter user:

(34)   **Is** #Russophobia**, which is being actively promoted by our Western ex-partners, included in the list, Mr. Secretary General, or is it a reflection of active and progressive civil position as some high-ranking warmongers claim?**   (24 May, 2022 – it refers to Guterres's tweet which reads "Hatred is a danger to everyone")

(35)   *Good to know, the whole internet was full of it.* **Will you debunk this one as well?**   (14 June, 2022)

4.2.5 RQs used in Polyanskiy's tweets – an overview

The use of RQs in Polyanskiy's tweets is characterized by the following: his RQs are mostly addressed to the general public; there is a large share of sarcastic RQs; he mostly uses RQs to express mockery, to criticize (primarily Western powers or leaders), or, to a lesser extent, to present certain arguments in a convincing way.

Who the RQs are addressed to	Number of tweets in which it appears	Main function	Target (if ridiculing or criticizing)	Share of sarcastic RQs
General public/Twitter community	34 (87.17%)	Ridiculing/ mockery 16 (41%)	Western powers/media/ leaders 12 (75%)	22 (64.7%)
			Ukrainian leaders/ Ukrainians 4 (25%)	
		Presenting convincing arguments 9 (23.07%)	-	
		Criticizing 9 (23.07%)	Western powers/media/ leaders 7 (77.77%)	
			Ukrainian leaders/ Ukrainians 1 (11.11.%)	
			Other 1 (11.11%)	
Western powers/ media/leaders	2 (5.12%)	Criticizing 1	-	-
		Warning 1		
Ukrainian leaders/ Ukrainians	1 (2.56%)	Criticizing 1	-	-
Individual	2 (5.12%)	Ridiculing/ mockery 1	-	1
		Other 1		
Total	39			23 (58.97%)

Table 5: An overview of the use of RQs in Polyanskiy's tweets

4.3 Differences and similarities in the use of RQs by Podolyak and Polyanskiy

A lot of differences in the use of RQs in the tweets of the two officials have been observed, starting with the frequency of use of such questions, which is statistically significant (p < .05. X2(1, N = 811) = 23.892, p = 0.00000102), with RQs being much more common in the tweets of the Ukrainian presidential adviser. If we have in mind that, as noted earlier, the use of RQs in tweets of another Ukrainian official (Kuleba) was so low that I had to select tweets of another Ukrainian official for this study, there is a strong indication that the frequency of use of RQs on Twitter is closely related to the individual language style of Twitter users.

Regarding the form of RQs, there is also a statistically significant difference (p < .05. X^2(4, N = 136) = 13.96, p = 0.00742382), mainly due to RQs realized in the form of declarative questions (and, to some extent, question tags), which are rather common only in Mykhailo Podolyak's tweets.

As for the use of sarcastic RQs in their tweets, there is no statistically significant difference between the two Twitter users (p>.05. X^2(1, N = 131) = 0.067, p = 0.79575593). As shown earlier, both of them often employ sarcastic RQs in their tweets (more than half of their RQs/strings of RQs are sarcastic), although certain patterns which have been noted in the formulation of sarcastic RQs by one of them (for instance, a question followed by a ridiculous answer, or the pattern X? *What X*?) was never or only once used by the other. It is also interesting to note that not all sarcastic RQs primarily serve to ridicule/express mockery – Podolyak's sarcastic RQs in eight tweets are mainly geared towards urging the West to help Ukraine, whereas Polyanskiy uses sarcastic RQs in six tweets with the main purpose to present arguments which are supposed to justify actions of the Russian side.

Interestingly, Podolyak mostly chooses to address his RQs directly to someone, mostly the enemy or Western powers/leaders, while most of Polyanskiy's RQs are directed at the general public, with targets, if any, being mentioned in the third person. A possible reason for this, in addition to individual differences, could be the Russian official's attempt to somehow justify the invasion of the Twitter community, and try to frame public opinion (cf. Hussain et al. 2021), especially in relation to what he sees as double standards of the West. Furthermore, it can also be a reflection of his disrespect towards the targets.

In regard to the main functions performed by RQs in their tweets, there is statistically significant difference (p < .05. X^2(4, N = 131) = 22.184, p = 0.00018421), which is mainly due to the extensive use of RQs as indirect requests by Mykhailo Podolyak. The results also show that the use of non-sarcastic RQs aimed at criticizing someone is significantly more common in Polyanskiy's tweets. When it comes to the RQs (sarcastic or non-sarcastic) which mainly serve to attack targets (ridicule or criticize them), the majority of Podolyak's RQs target someone from the Russian side (38 out of 48; 79.16% of such RQs/strings of RQs in his tweets), whereas such RQs in Polyanskiy's tweets mainly target Western powers, leaders, or media (21 out of 29; 72.41%), and only occasionally someone from the Ukrainian side.

Another point worth noting is that Podolyak's tweets with RQs always contain additional written content, whereas Polyaskiy occasionally uses RQs accompanied only by videos, retweets, or images, which are necessary for the full understanding of the messages conveyed by RQs.

5 Conclusion

The exploration of the use of RQs in tweets of Mykhailo Podolyak and Dmitry Polyanskiy confirmed that RQs play a prominent role in this kind of online discourse. However, the results of this study also indicate that the frequency of use of such questions is related to the individual style of Twitter users. While RQs used in the tweets of the two officials perform multiple functions, the primary ones include the following: ridiculing/expressing derision or criticizing the target; convincing the public; and, only in the tweets of the Ukrainian official, calling to action. These RQs are mostly addressed directly to the enemy or the West (in Podolyak's tweets), or to the entire Twitter community (Polyanskiy). Although the RQs identified in the corpus appear in different forms, the most common ones are *wh-*, classic *yes-no*, and fragmentary RQs, whereas RQs realized in the form of declarative sentences are frequent only in the tweets of Mykhailo Podolyak. An interesting finding is that, although rarely, RQs can also take the form of indirect questions.

Sarcastic RQs are frequently used by Podolyak and Polyanskiy (more than half of the RQs), and, interestingly, not only to ridicule or express derision towards someone. A number of patterns in which such RQs appear have been observed, but, in opposition to the findings of Oraby et al. (2016), the use of emoticons in combination with RQs was very rare.

Significant differences between the use of RQs by the two officials have been observed regarding the form of such questions, their main functions, who the RQs are directed at, as well as the accompanying content or material they used to facilitate the intended meaning. The results also show that Podolyak's RQs which are used to verbally attack someone mostly target the Russian invaders/leadership/individuals, whereas Polyanskiy primarily uses such RQs to target the Western powers/leaders/individuals, rather than the Ukrainian side.

A limitation of the study is the size of the corpus (a larger corpus would yield a more extensive range of different RQs), but the obtained results reveal tendencies of how RQs are used on Twitter by officials from the opposite sides, in light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Future studies could further explore this topic on a larger corpus, and by examining RQs posted by a number of officials, which would shed light on potential similarities between the use of RQs by the representatives of the same side.

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